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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000997

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NSC FOR WERNER/DORAN/ABRAMS/SINGH

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PINS ECON LE SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: TWO OBSERVERS FORESEE THE END OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE AND CONTINUANCE OF EMILE LAHOUD'S MANDATE

Classified By: JEFFREY FELTMAN, AMBASSADOR. REASON: SECTION 1.4(B).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Two men, from different sides of Lebanon's political divide told us this week that the national dialogue is over.

Ali Hamdan, political advisor to dialogue host, Nabih Berri, believes the talks will continue, inconclusive, until sometime in April as Berri plays out the clock. Akram Shuhhayeb, a Deputy in Walid Jumblatt's bloc says the international component in Lebanon's affairs must now take precedent over the internal component. Both agree on one fact, as things stand Emile Lahoud will likely remain in office until the end of his term. End summary.

"OR MAYBE THE DONKEY WILL SING;"  
PLAYING FOR TIME

¶2. (C) Nabih Berri is convinced that the national dialogue has exhausted all of its options. On March 28, Berri's political director told us that he and the speaker believe the selection of names for the presidency and the weapons of Hizballah cannot be resolved by the dialogue. A consensus among Christians is needed around the presidency and Syria and Iran must be addressed to secure Hizballah's weapons. In answer to the question of why the dialogue continues, Hamdan told us a joke. A man agrees, under threat of death, to teach a King's donkey to sing. When asked why he would accept such an impossible task, the man says much can happen over time, the king may die, he may die, or the donkey may sing. Hamdan expects the dialogue to continue until sometime in April. Berri is simply playing out the clock and hoping for the best. The best case scenario, for Berri, would be resolution of the presidency issue among the Christians. Hamdan said the Shia couldn't accept that the Sunni will select the next president in unfair, pre-cooked elections. Hamdan recognizes it is unlikely for Michel Aoun and the other Christians to reach agreement. So, he would like to see the Maronite Patriarch, as spiritual leader of the Maronites, select one name, or at least a list of names, so that the parliament could discuss them. If the Patriarch refuses this role, he should, in Hamdan's mind, be willing to clearly tell Lahoud to step down. There is no authority short of Cardinal Sfeir's high office that could pull the Christians together. If none of this happens, Hamdan believes Emile Lahoud will finish his term in office. Hamdan said that Berri sees no advantage in asking Lahoud to leave office until he has assurances that someone acceptable will replace Lahoud.

¶3. (C) The Syrians are playing for time, Hamdan said. He wondered out loud why both Syria and Michel Aoun wanted new parliamentary elections. For Hamdan, the answer to the convergence of Syrian and Aounist interests was at hand. Aoun may sincerely wish to change the balance of power in the parliament with new elections. But the Syrians recognize that by the time new elections could be organized and carried out Lahoud will have finished his term in peace. Now, the majority had to figure out a way to rule with Lahoud in place, according to Hamdan. He was critical of the failure of the GOL's election commission to produce a recommendation for a new law within the time allotted. "This was their thing. No one was blocking them. But they failed," said Hamdan.

THE PRESIDENCY--A GOAL PURSUED IN HASTE

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¶4. (C) Akram Shuhayyeb is a member of Walid Jumblatt's parliamentary bloc. He is dedicated to the ouster of Emile Lahoud and to the permanent retreat of Syrian influences in Lebanon. On March 28, He told us that he is secure in the knowledge that Emile Lahoud will finish his term in office. Shuhayyeb put some of the blame on Saad Hariri for the present stalemate. He said that Jumblatt, Ja'ja' and the other allies received assurances from Hariri that external pressure on Damascus would remove Lahoud from office. That pressure was to come from the U.S., France, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Saad had received these assurances from the Saudis.

The pressure did not come as expected and Lahoud is firmly in office.

¶5. (C) Now, the national dialogue has reached the limits of its power to influence events. Shuhayyeb said it took some effort to convince Walid Jumblatt to attend the March 27

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session. The region and the wider world control all of Lebanon's prerogatives on the presidency and on foreign relations, Shuhayyeb asserted. The Christians can't accept accord with one another, and they can't decide on a single candidate to support. The majority in parliament can't accept Emile Lahoud or Michel Aoun. The decision about who runs Lebanon is closely tied to the fate of Hizballah, and so it is the business of Iran and Syria. Syrian supporters in Lebanon will not move against the present resident in Baabda palace without approval from Damascus and this means a return of Syrian influence in Lebanese affairs.

¶6. (C) Without agreement on who is to follow him, the parliament will not be able to remove Lahoud by constitutional action. Shuhayyeb reckoned that any move against Lahoud from the floor would require Aoun or Berri's full participation. Neither man would be willing to move until the successor to Lahoud was named. Shuhayyeb was not certain that in Hizballah's case that successor would be Aoun. He said that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had made it plain, in one of his long meetings with Hariri, that he would be willing to forego naming Aoun if Saad Hariri would not put forward any names unpalatable to Nasrallah. So the road to progress was blocked by the presidency. Shuhayyeb said that Hariri had proposed to Aoun that he would withdraw his name from the running for PM if Aoun would do the same for his presidential candidacy. In reaction, Aoun left Hariri's side and began to silently pick through the hors d'oeuvres.

¶7. (C) Shuhayyeb said that he is part of a small group from Jumblatt's bloc who meet with Aoun and his people. He described the talks as flirtations, pursued because they will certainly have to deal with Aoun during the extended term of Emile Lahoud and beyond. During a meeting with Aoun, Shuhayyeb personally told the former general that Hizballah had agreed not to support Aoun for president if Hariri agreed not to submit names unacceptable to Hizballah. Aoun was not prepared to accept this role as stalking horse. To

demonstrate Aoun's response, Shuhhayyeb mimicked the General's habit of affecting an erect posture and adjusting his vest when disturbed.

¶18. (C) Shuhhayyeb was willing to entertain governing with Lahoud in office, but he warned that Syria could scotch any progress on the reform front though terrorism. "They could send more cars, or suitcases if they want." Shuhhayyeb said there were scores of vehicle routes into and out of Lebanon from Syria. These routes are not controlled by the Lebanese authorities and serve as contraband routes for all manner of evil goods and people. Security is an illusion that Lebanese leaders cannot afford, he said. Shuhhayyeb noted that Aoun was also afraid for his safety. The FPM leader told Shuhhayyeb "In Lebanon there is no political security."

¶19. (C) The parliament might be able to pass the election reform law, once submitted, Shuhhayyeb said. However, he raised objections to the proportional representations principles thought to be part of the suggested law as submitted to the GOL. Shuhhayyeb said that any talk of procedural reform on the election law could be easily done after the districts were drawn to the satisfaction of everyone. He was especially concerned that the Christians be satisfied that a new law protects them. "Muslims will be alright anywhere they are. But Christians have to know they can select their own representatives."

¶10. (C) Saad Hariri was still an inexperienced politician, according to Shuhhayyeb. "He has only been in politics for six months. But he is learning." Shuhhayyeb said that Hariri depends on the Saudis, whose ambassador to Lebanon Shuhhayyeb described as a sincere admirer of Hizballah. The Saudis are deeply worried about both stability in Syria and the Shia threat to the region. Any deal they broker for Lebanon will aim to satisfy their policy goals on these two issues.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Shuhhayyeb was neither disappointed nor angry at the idea of Lahoud remaining in office. He had resigned himself to the failure of March 14 to remove the President. Hamdan was likewise resigned to the waning of his boss' national dialogue. With both men, one got the feeling that at the middle levels, Lebanese politics could now slip back into its accustomed slumber if no outside force nudges it back to waking. End comment.

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